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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 ABIDJAN 000256

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SUBJECT: COTE D'IVOIRE: UNEVENTFUL THIRTEENTH INTERNATIONAL
WORKING GROUP MEETING

Classified By: POL/ECON Jim Wojtasiewicz, reasons 1.4 (B) and (D).

¶1. (C) Summary. The International Working Group (IWG) held its 13th meeting in Abidjan March 2. Perhaps the most dramatic moment came when the Communications Minister Delegate briefed the group on the growing pro-Gbagbo bias in the state-owned media since Gbagbo replaced the leadership of both Ivoirian Radio and television (RTI) and the state-owned newspaper Fraternite Matin last November. The Foreign Minister from Burkina Faso gave a presentation that was supposed to be a briefing on the status of the ongoing talks in Ouagadougou between representatives of President Gbagbo and rebel New Forces (FN) leader Soro, but he provided no real substantive information, citing an agreement among all the parties not to speak to the press. The meeting came up with a relatively bland communique except for language stating clearly that any agreement coming out of the Ouagadougou talks would fail unless the signatories honor the commitments they make in it. This was the most uneventful IWG meeting in memory, perhaps in part because it took place in the shadow of the Ouagadougou talks. Indeed, the agreement that was subsequently reached in Ouagadougou was largely silent on the UN or international role in the implementation of the agreement, which can only further marginalize an IWG that was already largely reduced to kibitzing from the sidelines. End Summary.

¶2. (U) The IWG held its 13th meeting in Abidjan on March 2. The meeting was co-chaired by Ghana Foreign Minister Nana Akufo-Addo and Acting Special Representative of the Secretary General (ASRSG) Abou Moussa. The meeting was attended by Benin Foreign Minister Mariam Aladji Boni Diallo, Burkina Faso Foreign Minister Youssouf Ouedraogo, France Cooperation Minister Brigitte Girardin, Republic of Congo Foreign Minister Rodolph Adada, South Africa Foreign Minister Nkosazana Dlamini-Zuma, UN High Representative for Elections (HRE) Gerard Stoudmann, and representatives of Guinea, Niger, Nigeria, the UK, the United States, the African Union, the Economic Union of West African States (ECOWAS), the European Union, the International Organization of the Francophonie, the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank.

¶3. (C) As usual, Prime Minister Banny sought to persuade the group that progress had been made over the past month in moving toward elections. He was able to cite very few specific accomplishments -- a small number of mobile courts re-launched, continued slow return of civilian administration to the North, especially the return of Treasury officials which he said would be followed by the return of the banks -- but more generally Banny insisted that life is returning to normal for the population. The group had no questions for Banny, only two somewhat strange outbursts addressed not to Banny but to the other members of the IWG. French Minister Girardin expressed French exasperation that the international community can give the Ivoirians the tools to make peace but it is up to the Ivoirians to use them. The representative from Guinea noted the painful crisis his country has been

going through and asked the IWG to help Guinea.

14. (C) Banny was accompanied by Minister Delegate for Communications Martine Coffi Studer. She briefed the group on the significant increase in biased news coverage in the state-owned media since last November when President Gbagbo sacked the leadership both of RTI and the state-owned newspaper Fraternite Matin. She said the government no longer had any control over these media or their finances. Banny noted that this was a violation of the Pretoria Accord and questioned how a fair election campaign could be held in these circumstances. HRE Stoudmann warned that he would not be able to certify the elections as fair if there were not equal access to state-owned media. Several other IWG members also expressed alarm over the situation in the state-owned media, and underscored the importance of including the restoration of press freedom in any agreement reached through the ongoing talks in Ouagadougou being mediated by Burkina Faso President Compaore between representatives of President Gbagbo and rebel FN leader Soro.

15. (C) Burkina Faso Foreign Minister Ouedraogo gave a presentation that was supposed to be a briefing on the status of the Ouagadougou talks but which provided no substantive information other than that all parties had agreed not to talk to the press. Ghana co-chair Akufo-Addo asked whether Ouedraogo could at least provide some sense of how much longer the talks would take, but he declined to do so. French Minister Girardin asked whether there might need to be changes to UN Security Council Resolution 1721, but Ouedraogo said it was too soon to tell.

16. (C) HRE Stoudmann briefed on what he said were timid steps taken toward elections over the previous month. He said that

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only 12 of the 25 mobile courts that were supposed to reopen had done so. Stoudmann did note that very few people are coming forward to these courts to apply for identification documents. He said this could be due in part to the fact that no courts have reopened in the North, where the largest number of undocumented people live.

17. (C) Outgoing AU special representative General Mokoko, chairman of the Mediation Group (a subgroup of the IWG charged with facilitating on a day-to-day basis the implementation of UNSCR 1721) ONUCI Force Commander General Amoussou and French Licorne Force Commander Lecerf all said the security situation in the country had improved slightly, as the population looked hopefully to the Ouagadougou talks to bring peace. However, Amoussou and Lecerf cautioned that the situation remains potentially explosive, because of the deteriorating infrastructure and the lack of educational and work opportunities for young people. General Lecerf in particular said with emotion that in the end it is the poorest people in this country who suffer the most as victims of the widespread banditry and culture of corruption in the security forces, and it is not the role of UN peacekeeping forces to help maintain such a status quo.

18. (C) Discussion of the communique was, as usual, long and tedious, but not particularly contentious. It was decided, at South Africa's suggestion, not to put into the communique the IWG's strong expectation that the Ouagadougou talks would fully address the issue of press freedom, but rather to communicate this directly and informally to President Compaore through Foreign Minister Ouedraogo (who happened at that moment not to be present in the room because he was meeting with President Gbagbo). It was also decided, to protect Communications Minister Delegate Studer, not to reveal in the communique that it was she who brought to the IWG's attention the growing problem of bias in the state media, but rather to pretend that the IWG had seized upon this issue itself. Proposed language reflecting General Lecerf's emphatic statements that UN peacekeeping forces are not here to help maintain a status quo in which the poorest

people suffer the most was also taken out. Finally, proposed language expressing the hope that the Ouagadougou talks would produce an agreement allowing UN and French peacekeeping forces to begin leaving was also deleted. All this left a relatively bland communique, with the exception of language stating clearly that any agreement reached at Ouagadougou will fail if the signatories do not honor the commitments they make in it.

¶9. (U) It was decided that the next IWG meeting will be April ¶13.

¶10. (C) In terms of atmospherics, over the course of the day at least six participants, including both current co-chairs, outgoing co-chair Republic of Congo Foreign Minister Adada, and Prime Minister Banny, paid tribute to the absent Lansana Kouyate, formerly the Francophonie representative on the IWG and now newly named Prime Minister of Guinea. Kouyate had always been an active and articulate participant in the IWG meetings. In contrast, no one had any words of tribute for the recently departed SRSR Pierre Schori.

¶11. (C) Comment. This was the most uneventful IWG meeting in memory, perhaps in part because it took place in the shadow of the Ouagadougou talks. Indeed, the agreement that was subsequently reached in Ouagadougou pays lip service to UNSCR 1721 but is largely silent on the UN or international role in the implementation of the agreement (except the gradual withdrawal of UN peacekeeping forces). This can only further marginalize the IWG, a body that was already largely reduced to kibitzing from the sidelines. End Comment.

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